

# Opportunity through online learning: Improving student success in online undergraduate studies

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Online learning has become a well-recognised part of the broader landscape of higher education. It is also proving to have a critical place in widening access and equity within this landscape. Increasing numbers of students from backgrounds historically under-represented at university are taking the opportunity to study online, particularly through open-entry and alternative pathways. As such, this mode of teaching and learning increasingly plays a role in sustaining mass higher education. However, retention in online undergraduate studies has been shown to be at least 20% lower than in face-to-face programs (Greenland & Moore, 2014; Moody, 2004). An Australian Government Department of Education and Training (2015) report measuring completion rates of domestic undergraduate students between 2005-2013 found that only 44.4% of fully external (online) students completed, compared with an overall completion rate of 72.3%. Examining what is happening, how effectively and with which student groups, as well as determining where are the gaps and what else is needed to engage and support diverse cohorts of students to stay and succeed in online education, is of crucial importance.

This presentation will outline a project investigating access, retention, and success in undergraduate online education, being conducted by one of the 2016 Inaugural Equity Fellows appointed by the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE). It will discuss the background to this project, its anticipated outcomes, progress made so far, preliminary findings and next steps. Through interviews with academic, professional and management staff at Australian Universities, Open Universities Australia and the Open University UK, this project is investigating teaching and pedagogy practices, supports and retention strategies currently being used within online undergraduate learning, including the integration of academic and learning support. Qualitative analysis of interview data, comparing and contrasting available data on effectiveness of strategies, as well as an examination of relevant and current international and national research, will inform the development of a set of national guidelines to provide sector leadership on evidence-based ways to improve the access, success and retention of students in online undergraduate education.

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